Eyes of Flesh and Eyes of Fire

Science and Gnosis

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Taking the words "Orient" and "Occident" not in their geographic or ethnic sense, but in the spiritual and metaphysical sense given them by tradition, we have spoken before of the contrast between the "pilgrims of the Orient and the vagabonds of the Occident." Now it is a question of knowing how to attempt the pilgrimage toward the Orient and extricate ourselves from vagabondage. First of all, the way must be discovered. With what eyes must we look in order to discover this way and set out on it?

Let us begin by recalling that in the biblical visions, Angels are recognized by their eyes of fire (cf Daniel 10:6, Apoc. 19:12, etc.). When we contrast the eyes of the soul with the eyes of the flesh, it is these eyes of fire that are referred to.

The point of this year's theme is to mark, by the contrast between the look of the eyes of flesh and the look of the eyes of fire, the contrast between the way present-day "science" looks at beings and things and the way they are looked at by what is traditionally designated as “gnosis.”

In order to justify our extension of the concept of gnosis, let me remind you that ever since the Congress of Messina (April 1966) scholars have agreed to differentiate the use of the word "gnosticism" from that of the word "gnosis." It is understood that the gnosticism of the first centuries of our era only constitutes one chapter in the whole of gnosis (there is a Jewish gnosis, a Christian gnosis, an Islamic gnosis, a Buddhist gnosis, etc.). Therefore, we do not propose to take a position concerning the problems raised about gnosticism by historians of religion and historians of dogma —and still less to take these discussions up again. It is one thing for a historian to propose hypotheses on the origins of gnosis; it is another to ask ourselves the theoretical and practical significance of gnosis for us today, because gnosis is not a phenomenon tied to the historical conditions of the second century, but a religious phenomenon perpetuating itself from century to century.

It is essentially a question of acknowledging the generally accepted definition of the word gnosis as designating a certain type or mode of knowledge, correlated with the phenomenon of the world to which this type of knowledge corresponds, and of making use of this as a criterion in order to bring judgment to bear on the concept of "science" in the form that dominates our epoch. In other words, it is essentially a question of determining with what eyes this "science" (in all its domains) looks at the world, and with what eyes gnosis looks at it. The point is that the phenomenon of the world, or rather the phenomenon of worlds, varies decisively according to the way it is looked at. The phenomenon of the world cannot be constituted in the same way when looked at with the eyes of flesh and the eyes of fire.

Let it be understood that gnosis is characterized as the salvational, redemptive, soteriological knowledge because it has the virtue of bringing about the inner transformation of man. The world which is the object of this knowledge implies in its very plan the role and function of this knowledge itself. The dramatic aspect of the cosmogony in which the human soul is itself a protagonist is in fact the very drama of gnosis: the fall from the world of Light, the exile and the struggle in the world of blindness and ignorance, the triumphant final redemption.

That is why one is astounded when present-day historians, or philosophers, reputedly serious in other domains, adopt a conception of gnosis, perhaps from second or third-hand sources, which in fact is the exact opposite of gnosis. We have heard the idea expressed that ideology is to modern science what gnosis is to religious faith. This analogy of the relationship is completely false, first of all because the result of the secularization of religious faith is not modern science but rather ideology itself. This has nothing to do with gnosis, which has avoided just this secularization. Gnosis is not a matter of dogma but of symbol. People have even gone so far as to turn a now dead ideologist and political leader into something of a gnostic, under the pretext that if the believer knows that he believes, the ideologist believes that he knows. More sophistry: the word "believe" is not used in the same way each time, and we can be sure that the ideologist does not believe that he knows, he knows that he knows.

It is these catastrophic confusions that lead people to say, for example, that gnosis claims to give a "positive knowledge" of the mysteries, and that this knowledge contradicts faith. Far from it! Gnosis and its theosophy have nothing in common with what is understood these days by "positive knowledge." But an irritating symptom of these impertinent confusions is the use today, without rhyme or reason, of the word "Manichaeism" when it is simply a matter of duality and dualism, as if all dualism was merely a secularization of Manichaeism when in fact neither

Manichaean religion nor gnosis has anything to do with it. It is all taking place as if ignorance and an anti-gnostic feeling, tacit and unexplained, were striving to go beyond the limits of absurdity.

Since we are going to speak of gnosis in this period of study, these warnings are necessary at the outset. It appears to me that all these pseudo-criticisms misinterpret, simply and absolutely, the meaning of the word gnosis. They identify it merely with knowing and they oppose it to believing.

Now, in point of fact, as we have just said, in contrast to all other learning or knowledge, gnosis is salvational knowledge. To speak of gnosis as theoretical knowledge is a contradiction in terms. It must therefore be admitted that in contrast to all other theoretical learning or knowledge, gnosis is knowledge that changes and transforms the knowing subject. This, I know, is just what cannot be admitted by an agnostic science, let alone a philosophy or a theology which can only, in some sense, speak of gnosis in the third person. But when one speaks of it in that way, one is no longer speaking of gnosis, and all the criticism misses the mark.

It is therefore necessary, before continuing, to expose these confusions and their sources.

A first source of confusion stems from the fact that critics of gnosis have at their disposal only two categories, believing and knowing, and they identify gnosis with knowing alone. It is thus completely over-looked that between believing and knowing there is a third mediating term, everything connoted by the term inner vision, itself corresponding to this intermediary and mediatory world forgotten by the official philosophy and theology of our times: the *mundus imaginalis*, the imaginal world. Islamic gnosis offers here the necessary triadic scheme: there is intellective knowledge (*'agl*), there is knowledge of traditional ideas which are objects of faith (*nagl*), and there is knowledge as inner vision, intuitive revelation (*kashf*). Gnosis is inner vision. Its mode of exposition is narrative; it is a recital. Inasmuch as it sees, it knows. But inasmuch as what it sees does not arise from "positive" empirical, historical data, it believes. It is Wisdom and it is faith. It is *Pistis Sophia*.

Another source of confusion is the lack of discrimination between the gnostic schools of the second century, between a Valentinus and a Marcion. Valentinus never professed the metaphysical antisemitism of Marcion as regards the God of the Old Testament. Quite the contrary. Moreover, there is an original Jewish gnosis found in the Judaeo-Christian literature called pseudo-Clementine, in a book such as the Hebrew Third Enoch, the main document of the mystical theology of the *Merkabah*. Some scholars even tend to give gnosis a Judaic origin.

Finally, let us expose another confusion: the cosmology of gnosis is in no way a nihilism, a sort of "decreation" of the creative act. How could it be, since the aim of gnosis is cosmic salvation, the restoration of things to the state which preceded the cosmic drama? The gnostic is a stranger, a prisoner in this world, to be sure, but as such his mission is to aid in the liberation of other prisoners. And this mission will not be done without a great many efforts.

Now that these warnings have been formulated, we are free to put into perspective a present-day phenomenon that strongly undercuts the impertinent criticisms of gnosis. It is significant that a certain number of scholars, observing in good faith that rationalism is powerless to provide a rational explanation of the world and of man, tend to turn back to a vision of the world that draws from traditional cosmologies. They speak of a "cosmic consciousness" because an Intelligence must be at work in order to explain the phenomenon, and they invoke the words gnosis and new gnosis.

At this point, we at the Universite Saint Jean de Jerusalem must consider a serious question or, more exactly, a twofold hypothesis. Will there really be a renewal of gnosis, bearing witness to the fact that gnosis cannot remain indefinitely absent and that its banishment was a catastrophe? If so, we are ready to bring reinforcements. But has this renewal sufficient backbone for the word "gnosis" not to be usurped nor the authenticity of the concept imperiled? If this were unfortunately to occur, our task would be to speak out against the peril.

As a first step, we must begin by putting to profitable use the schema common to all forms of gnosis, in order to rigorously define on the one hand the situs of agnostic science and on the other the situs of a science aspiring to a new gnosis.

We can illustrate this *status quaestionis* from many different perspectives.

For example, we still have to restore the true face of the science of Newton. People have made of him one of the great founders of the mechanistic conception of the universe, of the science with eyes of flesh, while three-fourths of his work, mystical and alchemical, springs from the knowledge with eyes of fire.

Considering Jacob Boehme and like figures, it is a question of determining what alchemy would signify as spiritual science if it had at its disposal the resources of modern laboratories and observatories.

We have still to explicate the gnostic view of the world of visionaries with "eyes of fire," such as William Blake, Wordsworth, Goethe, etc.

By the same token, we have still to judge if what we have heard of a so-called Princeton gnosis truly tends toward a gnosis with "eyes of fire" or whether on the contrary it is attempting to the fatal compromise with a gnosis with "eyes of flesh." On the other hand, a man like Nicholas Berdyaev could rightly be considered a "modern gnostic."

We have finally, or rather most of all, in order to stay within the line of our fundamental calling, to uncover for the first time the convergence of cosmogonical and soteriological visions in the type of gnosis common to the three Abrahamic branches.

Of course, it is impossible to examine all these aspects at one time. Our program this year proposes a few of them to lay the groundwork for future developments.

Finally, it should be clearly apparent to everyone why we have associated the concept of gnosis with the look of eyes of fire. Inasmuch as the look of gnosis is a visionary look and not the look of theoretical knowledge, it is wedded to the look of the prophets, spokesmen of the Invisible. To open "the eyes of fire" is to go beyond all false and vain opposition between believing and knowing, between thinking and being, between knowledge and love, between the God of the prophets and the God of the philosophers. The gnostics of Islam, in agreement with the Jewish Kabbalists, have particularly insisted on the idea of a "prophetic philosophy." It is a prophetic philosophy that our world needs. It is to this above all that we must be called. Such was the meaning of the passage written by the philosopher Theodore Roszak that I have quoted elsewhere. It has the force of a program: "Perhaps I am implying," he wrote, "that the resurrection (of gnosis) figures among the most urgent projects of our epoch."